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MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC

Philosophical Writings

EDITED BY
MUHAMMAD ALI KHALIDI
American University of Beirut



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*For Amal and Zayd,
who never knew each other*

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Developing in the late ninth century AD and evolving without interruption for the next four centuries, medieval Islamic philosophy was instrumental in the revival of philosophizing in Europe in the Middle Ages. Philosophers in the Islamic world were strongly influenced by Greek works and adapted some of the Platonic, Aristotelian, and other ideas to their brand of monotheism. But they also developed an original philosophical culture of their own, which had a considerable, but hitherto largely unexplored, impact on the subsequent course of western philosophy. Their problems and concerns are echoed in medieval European philosophy, and resonate to some extent in early modern philosophy.

Notwithstanding the substantial influence that it has had on western philosophy, medieval Islamic philosophy is not generally regarded as part of the philosophical canon in the English-speaking world, and such figures as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) remain obscure by comparison with Augustine and Aquinas. More often than not, they are either considered curiosities deriving from an entirely different philosophical tradition, or preservers of and commentators on the Greek philosophical heritage without a sufficiently original contribution of their own. The reasons for these omissions and for the disparagement of Islamic philosophy are steeped in the often conflicted history of Islam and Christendom. This is not the place to go into an account of the reception of these texts in the west and of their declining fortunes in the canon, since the purpose here is to reintroduce a small portion of these works to readers more familiar with the standard western philosophical corpus. This anthology attempts to provide a representative sample of the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition in a manner that is accessible to beginning students

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of philosophy, as well as to more seasoned philosophers with little or no exposure to this tradition.

The main challenge associated with preparing an anthology of this kind has to do with the selection of texts. The aim has been to choose a small number of approachable texts from some of the most representative practitioners of Islamic philosophy, and to translate them into comprehensible language with a minimum of footnotes and annotations. This volume contains extracts from longer philosophical works rather than entire texts or a large number of brief passages from a variety of texts. The selections assembled here are taken from five texts by five authors: al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ṭufayl, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). This list includes what many scholars would consider to be the paradigmatic exemplars of the tradition, though some may question the chronological endpoint on the grounds that it perpetuates the mistaken impression that Islamic philosophy died out with Ibn Rushd (1126–98 AD), whereas it actually endured far beyond that point. But despite the survival of philosophical activity of some kind in the Islamic world, I would argue that a “style of reasoning”¹ did indeed decline after Ibn Rushd, one that is seamlessly connected to natural science, a logic-based, Greek-influenced, and rationalist enterprise.

This anthology tries to achieve some thematic unity by focusing broadly on metaphysics and epistemology rather than on ethics and political philosophy. Though the distinction is somewhat artificial in the context of medieval Islamic philosophy, since few texts discuss ethics without bringing in some metaphysics and vice versa, one can often extract portions of texts where the emphasis is decidedly on “theoretical” questions rather than “practical” ones. It might be added that epistemology (unlike metaphysics) was not recognized as a distinct branch of philosophy by these writers, and that this category is therefore something of an imposition. Bearing these two points in mind, it is quite possible to select texts with these complementary foci, broadly construed. The issues discussed in these selections (language, meaning, mind, knowledge, substance, essence, accident, causation, and so on) might be said to reflect our current philosophical predilections rather than to represent Islamic philosophy “as it saw itself.” But if the aim is partly to “mainstream” Islamic philosophy,

¹ The phrase is used by Ian Hacking to apply to the history of science, following A. C. Crombie. See I. Hacking, “Five Parables,” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

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then the approach should be to select texts that will be of particular interest to a contemporary audience.

Another challenge associated with preparing such a volume consists in choosing texts that will be of interest not just to a philosophical audience, but also to students of Islamic civilization. Orientalist scholars have often regarded philosophy as being marginal to Islamic history and culture, but more nuanced interpreters of the tradition have underscored the latent philosophical content in Islamic civilization, ranging from ubiquitous Arabic terms originally coined for philosophical purposes, to substantive theses concerning the best form of government, to more general attitudes towards the relation between faith and reason. As Albert Hourani has written: “There was a submerged philosophical element in all later Islamic thought.”² Moreover, many prevailing Islamic attitudes were formulated, at least in part, in reaction to the views of the Islamic philosophers, and such establishment figures as Ibn Ḥazm, al-Shahrastānī, Ibn Taymīyah, Ibn Khaldūn, and others frequently occupied themselves in responding to them. For obvious reasons, a collection of texts in moral and political philosophy might be thought to have more direct relevance to those interested in Islamic culture, history, and religion, than one that focuses mainly on epistemology and metaphysics. But theoretical philosophy, no less than practical philosophy, had an important impact on foundational debates concerning the conception of God, the place of humanity in the universe, the limits of reason, and the nature of the afterlife, among many others.

In what follows, I will try to provide short introductions to each of the texts excerpted in this volume, trying to strike a balance between textual exegesis and critical commentary. These brief introductions to the individual texts contain minimal historical background on the authors of these texts, since that can readily be gleaned from other sources. I will introduce the texts from the perspective of the “history of philosophy” rather than “intellectual history,” to use a distinction that has been drawn in recent years.³ In other words, in addition to communicating aspects of

² Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 18.

³ See, for example, Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy in History*. In their opinion, an “ideal intellectual history would have to bracket questions of reference and truth,” whereas an ideal history of philosophy would not (p. 2). Though I do not agree fully with the way they make the distinction between the two disciplines, I think that there is an important, though elusive, distinction to be drawn.

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their content and highlighting their most distinctive positions, I will try to engage critically with some of their arguments and venture occasional assessments of them. This is meant to be a departure from the prevailing tendency to approach these texts as historical oddities with little to say to contemporary thinkers.

Al-Fārābī, *The Book of Letters*

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c. 878–c. 950 AD) was born in Turkestan on the northeastern border of the lands under Islamic rule, in the town of Fārāb (in present-day Turkmenistan on the border with Uzbekistan). He is said to have moved to Baghdād at an early age when his father, who was a military officer, was one of the Turkish mercenaries recruited by the °Abbāsīd court. Some accounts state that he was taught philosophy by Yūḥannā bin Haylān, a Nestorian Christian whose intellectual lineage connected him to the Greek philosophical school of Alexandria. Fārābī lived and taught for almost all his life in Baghdād, but in 942, when he was reportedly in his seventies, he accepted an invitation from the Ḥamdānīd ruler Sayf al-Dawlah to move to Aleppo. He died there or in Damascus (accounts differ) eight years later, in 950. His philosophical output was prolific and diverse: over a hundred different texts are attributed to him, including works on logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and a well-known treatise on music.

This selection from Fārābī comprises the middle section of *The Book of Letters* (*Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*), which represents a thematic break from the first and last sections of a text that is devoted largely to metaphysical terms and the meanings of Arabic words used in philosophical discourse. By contrast, this portion of the work is a genetic account of the origin of language, as well as the origins of various disciplines, culminating in philosophy and religion. Throughout, Fārābī assumes a tripartite classification of types of discourse or modes of reasoning, which was to become central to a great deal of Islamic philosophy in subsequent centuries. In ascending order of rigor, the types of reasoning are: rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative. Rhetorical and dialectical reasoning are associated with the multitude of human beings and are the modes of reasoning adopted in popular disciplines, whereas demonstrative reasoning is the province of an elite class of philosophers, who use it to achieve certainty. The main difference between these three types of discourse consists in the types of

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premises from which they begin, and hence the extent to which they provide an ultimate justification for their conclusions. Rhetorical disciplines, as Fārābī makes clear elsewhere, base their conclusions on persuasive opinions, while dialectical ones begin from commonly accepted opinions. By contrast, demonstrative disciplines are those that start from first principles or self-evident premises and proceed to prove everything else from them, either directly or indirectly.

In this text, Fārābī makes clear that this ascending hierarchy also corresponds to a genetic progression, rhetoric being the first mode of discourse to appear in human affairs, followed by dialectic, and then demonstration. In addition to these three main types of discourse, sophistical discourse appears alongside dialectic, employing false or dubious premises rather than true (but uncertain) ones. Some disciplines also employ images or similes instead of literal language, further removing discourse from literal truth and certainty. In particular, Fārābī regards religion as couching philosophical truths in the form of similes for popular consumption. Moreover, the two principal religious sciences, theology and jurisprudence, are based on religion and are dialectical or rhetorical in nature, sometimes taking the similes of religion for literal truth. This means that philosophy precedes religion, which in turn precedes the derivative disciplines of theology and jurisprudence.

Before giving an account of the development of the three main modes of discourse, Fārābī proposes a theory of the origin of language. Language arises in a particular nation (*ummah*) when people start to use visible signals to indicate their intention to others, later replacing these visible signs with audible ones. The first signs are those for particular perceptibles, followed by signs for universals that can be derived from perceptibles. The process of assigning words to particulars and universals happens first haphazardly among small groups of people, who effectively develop a convention to use certain words to pick out certain things. They do so not by stipulation, but rather by falling in with a certain practice. Eventually, these scattered efforts are managed by someone, who also invents sounds for things that have yet to be assigned sounds, plugging the gaps in their language by introducing new terms. Then, after expressions settle on meanings, linguistic rules start to be broken, issuing in figurative meanings. A word that has already been attached to a certain meaning comes to be associated with a different meaning, based on some near or distant resemblance between the two meanings.

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Fārābī's distinction between literal and figurative language allows him to develop a distinctive view of the relation between reason and revelation, and his distinction between the three modes of reasoning (rhetorical, dialectical, demonstrative) enables him to explain the relationship of philosophy to theology and jurisprudence. The introduction of figurative or metaphorical meanings paves the way for three syllogistic arts to come into being: rhetoric, poetry, and linguistics. As figures of speech and other devices are introduced, rhetoric begins to develop as a skill or "art" (*sinā'ah*, cf. Greek *technē*), which is the first of the syllogistic arts. It is syllogistic in that it employs logical argumentation, but the premises and intelligibles (or universal concepts) that it deploys are all popular or rhetorical ones. This implies that the art that studies rhetoric, like rhetorical speeches themselves, is not based on first principles but on premises that are persuasive to the multitude. After the appearance of the rhetorical arts, Fārābī needs to explain how dialectical and demonstrative arts originate. The crucial development is that people become interested in ascertaining the causes of things in the natural world and in mathematics. At first, their inquiries are rhetorical and are rife with disputes and differences of opinion, since rhetorical discourse is based merely on persuasive opinions. But as they endeavor to justify their mathematical and scientific claims to one another in argument and debate, their methods begin to achieve more thorough justification and they discover the dialectical methods, distinguishing them from the sophistical methods (which they use "in times of crisis" [141]). Eventually, the method of demonstration or certainty emerges, which is applied to theoretical matters as well as to political affairs and other practical matters, which pertain to human volition. Earlier, political matters had been broached using dialectical methods. But the theoretical and practical sciences are only perfected using demonstrative methods. Once these sciences are discovered using demonstration, the need arises in a society to convey these theoretical and practical matters to the multitude, resulting in a need for lawgiving. Religion then steps in to legislate in such a way as to convey these matters to a wider public through images and similes. Fārābī concludes that the religious lawgiver conveys some of the contents of philosophy to the multitude in the form of images and nonliteral discourse. Finally, the religious sciences of theology and jurisprudence arise in order to infer things that were not openly declared by the founder of the religion, basing themselves not on first principles but on those things

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that were openly declared in that religion, which makes them dialectical disciplines.

Thus, religion succeeds philosophy and serves mainly to convey its deeper truths in a form that is accessible to the multitude. However, Fārābī is aware that this neat progression can be broken in some cases, notably when religion is imported from one nation to another. In such cases, religion might precede philosophy rather than succeed it, as in the paradigm case that he discusses. In addition, religion might be corrupt, if it is based on a nondemonstrative philosophy, which is still being developed using rhetorical, dialectical, or sophistical methods. This is “philosophy” in name alone, since true philosophy for Fārābī is undoubtedly demonstrative. Such a corrupt religion will inevitably come into conflict with true philosophy, since it is based on a false or dubious philosophy. That is not the only way that religion and philosophy might come into conflict, as Fārābī explains in what might be a veiled reference to the relationship of religion and philosophy in Islam. Sometimes a religion based on a true philosophy is brought to some nation before the philosophy upon which it is based. When that philosophy eventually reaches the nation, the adherents of the religion, who assume that their religion contains the truth rather than similes of the truth, will oppose the philosophy. The philosophers will also be opposed to religion at first, until they realize that it contains figurative representations of philosophical truths. At that point, they will become reconciled to it, but the adherents of religion will remain implacably hostile, forcing the philosophers to defend themselves. However, if a religion is based on a corrupt philosophy, then whichever of the two, religion or philosophy, predominates in a nation “will eliminate the other from it” [150].

At the end of the selection, Fārābī discusses the way in which religion and philosophy are transferred from one nation or culture to another. He holds that when the philosophers of one nation encounter a new philosophical concept that has been imported from another nation, for which they have no expression, they can do one of two things. They can invent a new word, which can either be a neologism or a transliteration of the term in the other language. Alternatively, they can “transfer” a term used for some nonphilosophical or popular concept. In so doing, they can either use the corresponding popular term that has been used by the other nation, or else they can use a different popular term, while preserving the associations that that term had in the first nation. Fārābī thus implies

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that philosophical concepts are sometimes denoted by terms borrowed from other contexts because of the broader connotations associated with those terms. Indeed, he explains that “one group” is of the opinion that philosophical terms should not be borrowed from other more popular contexts on account of a certain resemblance, but that one should always invent new terms for novel philosophical concepts to avoid confusing the philosophical concept with the popular one. His rejoinder to this opinion is that this resemblance to popular meanings has a certain pedagogical utility when teaching a novice in philosophy, since it enables the student to grasp the philosophical concept more quickly. However, he does admit that one must always guard against confusion in these contexts, as one guards generally against homonymous words.

Ibn Sīnā, *On the Soul*

Abū ʿAlī Ibn Sīnā (980–1037 AD) may be regarded as the great system-builder among Islamic philosophers, composing compendious works in philosophy, medicine, science, and religion, as well as on literary and linguistic matters. Ibn Sīnā was born of Persian parentage around half a century after Fārābī died, near the town of Bukhārā (in modern Uzbekistan), then capital of the Samānid dynasty, a semi-independent regime generally loyal to the Baghdad-based ʿAbbāsīd caliphate. His father was sympathetic to the Ismāʿīlīs, a breakaway sect from Shīʿī Islam, who were influenced by neo-Platonist ideas. He was exposed to these ideas from an early age and had a basic religious education as well as lessons in logic, mathematics, natural science, philosophy, and medicine, all of which he is said to have mastered by the age of 18. He relates that he reread Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* forty times without understanding it, until he came upon one of Fārābī’s works, which explained it to him. He was appointed a physician at the Samānid court, but their rule disintegrated under Turkish attack in 999 and Ibn Sīnā left to roam the cities of Persia, moving from city to city, serving in various senior posts. He died in 1037, assisting the ruler of Iṣfahān on a campaign against Hamadān, though he had refused an official position. Even more productive than Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā’s corpus includes a number of works of a mystical nature written in what is known as the “illuminationist” (*ishrāqī*) style of philosophizing. His celebrated work in medicine, *Kitāb al-Qānūn fil-Ṭibb* (*The Book of the Canon of Medicine*, *The Canon* for short), remained in use in Latin translation in Renaissance

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Europe, and is cited as *the* authoritative medical textbook in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Ibn Sīnā's magnum opus *The Book of Healing* (*Kitāb al-Shifā'*) is a multivolume overview of the philosophical sciences, including logic, natural science, and divine metaphysics. The text excerpted here, *The Book of Salvation* (*Kitāb al-Najāt*), is a condensed version of that longer work organized into the three divisions mentioned, the second of which includes a section on the soul. Though Ibn Sīnā wrote numerous works in which he discussed the nature of the soul, this section contains perhaps his most succinct yet thorough treatment of the main topics relating to the human soul: the intellect, the acquisition of knowledge, abstraction, the immateriality of the intellect, the origination of the soul, the immortality of the soul, the refutation of reincarnation, the unity of the soul, and the Active Intellect. The selections translated here omit the first three chapters concerning the vegetative soul, the animal soul, and the internal senses of the soul, and begin with a chapter on the (human) rational soul.

When it comes to the topic of the human soul, the basic challenge for Ibn Sīnā and other Islamic philosophers was to reconcile Aristotle's account, which is not unequivocally dualist in nature, with an account which not only conceives of the soul as being a separate self-standing substance, but also subscribes to the immateriality, incorruptibility, and immortality of individual souls. One central aspect of Ibn Sīnā's dualist theory of the soul has to do with the different grades that can be attained by the human soul, depending on the degree to which its potential has been actualized. Initially, the human soul, or more precisely, the theoretical part of it, namely the intellect (*'aql*), is pure potential and is known as the "material intellect" (in analogy with prime matter before it receives any forms – not because it is literally material). Once it has acquired the basic building blocks of thinking, namely the first intelligibles or the purely rational principles that are unproven premises underlying the entirety of human knowledge (e.g. things equal to the same thing are equal to one another), it is known as the "habitual intellect." Then, after the soul acquires the rest of the intelligibles, it becomes the "actual intellect"; and at this point it is capable of reasoning and proving (or demonstrating) the totality of knowledge. Finally, whenever it actually grasps the intelligibles or thinks, it turns into the "acquired intellect."

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Throughout this process, an agent is needed to effect the transformation of the intellect from potentiality into actuality. That agent is known as the Active Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-faʿcāl*). The doctrine of the Active Intellect, which was developed by other Islamic philosophers prior to Ibn Sīnā and based ultimately on certain hints in Aristotle, is very distinctive to Islamic philosophy in general and to Ibn Sīnā in particular. Like other Islamic philosophers, Ibn Sīnā identifies the Active Intellect with the last of the celestial intelligences, that is, the intellects that are supposed to govern the motions of each of the ten celestial spheres (the outermost sphere of the heavens, sphere of the fixed stars, and so on).⁴ The first celestial intelligence emanates directly from God, the second intelligence emanates from the first, the third from the second, and so on, until eventually the Active Intellect (the tenth intelligence, which governs the sphere of the moon) emanates to serve as a link between the celestial realm and the terrestrial realm. In addition to endowing natural things with their forms (hence, it is sometimes also termed the “bestower of forms”), it is responsible for activating the human intellect at the main stages of its intellectual development. Moreover, in certain exceptional individuals, it is instrumental in speeding up the process whereby the actual intellect becomes an acquired intellect. Such people are prophets and they are said to be endowed with a “holy intellect” or “intuition.” At the end of the actualization process (i.e. at the stage of the acquired intellect or the holy intellect), the soul becomes something like a mirror image of the Active Intellect, containing the very same knowledge.

Embedded in this account of the stages through which the intellect progresses is an explanation of the significance of prophecy. Like other Islamic philosophers, Ibn Sīnā was intent on locating prophetic revelation within his overall metaphysical and epistemological system, and he does so in his own distinctive way. Rather than regarding prophecy as mainly a matter of the capacity to convey demonstrative philosophical truths in symbolic idiom, as Fārābī does, he views it as a superior intellectual ability to reach demonstrative conclusions more quickly than the ordinary rational person. Therefore, prophets equipped with holy intellects are capable of acquiring the same demonstrative knowledge as philosophers, but they do so in a shorter time. Ibn Sīnā makes a point of mentioning

⁴ In addition to these two spheres, there are seven others, associated with the five known planets (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury), the sun, and the moon. The celestial intelligences were thought to be represented in religious discourse by the angels.

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that they travel the same route as the philosophers, namely by pursuing a chain of deductive reasoning. As he puts it, they do so “not by conforming to convention but rather in an orderly manner that includes the middle terms” of syllogisms [206]. He insists on this, pointing out that beliefs acquired merely conventionally are not certain and rational.

In order to understand Ibn Sīnā’s account of knowledge acquisition in more detail, it is necessary to introduce the external and internal senses. The external senses are, of course, the familiar five senses, which are instrumental in the acquisition of knowledge. In addition to these, Ibn Sīnā also posits five internal senses, which constitute the link in the chain between the external senses and the intellect. These are described directly before the excerpt translated in this volume and consist of five psychological faculties, as follows: (1) *phantasy* (Arabic *fanṭāsiyā*, a transliteration of Greek *phantasia*) or the *common sense*: brings together sensory information from the five senses; (2) *representation*: preserves the sensory information; (3) *imagination*: operates on the sensory information by manipulating the images thus preserved; (4) *estimation*: attaches rudimentary evaluative estimations to these images; and (5) *recollection*: preserves these evaluative estimations. The faculties of external sense, internal sense, and intellect eventuate in ever greater degrees of abstraction from the natural world. Like Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā understands sense perception as a process of acquiring the form of a substance, thereby abstracting it from matter. This measure of abstraction (which he also refers to as “extraction”) from matter is minimal, as he explains, since the sensory image is only retained as long as the natural substance remains in place, and it disappears when it is removed or annihilated. A somewhat greater degree of abstraction is achieved by the faculty of representation, which abstracts forms from matter but not from the dependents of matter. In other words, though representations remain when the objects of representation are not present, they are not fully general or universal since they retain the accidents that accompany forms in the material world. Thus, for example, a representation of a human being in the soul will not be universal but will instead resemble some human or another, whether real or imaginary. To a first approximation, a representation of a human being may be thought of as some kind of mental image in memory, which must always have a determinate stature, color, shape, and so on. Yet further abstraction is achieved by the faculty of estimation, which attaches value to sensory particulars, such as approval and disapproval. This process of abstraction

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culminates in the intellect, since intelligible forms are wholly divorced from matter. For example, when it comes to the form *human*, the intellect separates it from matter to such an extent that it is applicable to all exemplars of humanity. How does this method of concept formation square with the process whereby the Active Intellect implants knowledge in the soul? Presumably, we can acquire these concepts only because the Active Intellect simultaneously activates them. Otherwise, we would not recognize them once we have attained them, which is the problem famously posed by Plato in formulating Meno's paradox.

Ibn Sīnā's brand of dualism rests on establishing that the human soul, more properly the intellect, is fundamentally immaterial. His main proof is a *reductio ad absurdum*, which relies on the premise that matter is infinitely divisible. He begins by assuming the opposite, namely that the soul is material, and considers what would follow if the soul were a divisible material entity. If this divisible entity is actually divided and the intelligible or concept contained in the soul is thereby also divided in two parts, various absurdities would ensue. A concept can only be divided into its constituent parts, namely genus and differentia (e.g. the concept *human* would be divided into the parts, *animal* and *rational*). But since a material body is potentially infinitely divisible, the genus and differentia would themselves have to be infinitely divisible. However, they are not, since such conceptual decomposition comes to an end. Moreover, he states that not all concepts are decomposable into genus and differentia, since some are the simplest building blocks of all other concepts. From this, he concludes that the soul must be an immaterial entity.

One thorny philosophical problem that confronted Ibn Sīnā has to do with reconciling the philosophical position that all souls are identical in essence, particularly virtuous souls that have attained the same level of knowledge and have the same intelligible content, with the view that souls remain distinct and separate in the afterlife. In at least one work, his predecessor Fārābī implies that virtuous souls do not maintain their distinctness in the afterlife.⁵ Once they are freed of material attachments, there is nothing to distinguish human souls from one another, since they are all essentially reflections of the Active Intellect; hence, they unite with one another and with the Active Intellect. This is tantamount to a denial

⁵ This view is expressed in *Kitāb al-Siyāṣah al-Madanīyyah*; translated in Alfarabi, "The Political Regime," in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Lerner and M. Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), p. 38.

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of the doctrine of personal salvation. Ibn Sīnā's attempt to avoid such an unorthodox conclusion begins with his account of the origination of the soul. An individual soul comes into existence at the point at which a body originates that is suitable for being governed by that soul. Thus, the origination of the body is an accidental cause of the origination of the soul, whose essential cause is the "separate principles" (*al-mabādi' al-mufāriqah*), which are the celestial intelligences. He argues that the soul comes into being at the very instant as the body and does not exist before the body. At the moment of origination, a soul is endowed with "a particular disposition to be attracted to governing a particular body," which is "an essential concern that is specific to it" [220]. Then, in the course of a human life and as a result of its association with a particular body, that soul acquires further specificity and becomes distinguished from other souls. Accordingly, after separating from the body, each soul will have become a separate essence. This enables Ibn Sīnā to assert that individual souls maintain their distinctness in the afterlife, despite the fact that they may have acquired exactly the same degree of knowledge and are therefore identical in intellectual content. However, questions might be raised about Ibn Sīnā's account of the individuality of human souls, which posits souls that are essentially identical and yet also possess "an essential concern" towards governing particular bodies. If this means that they are essentially different in terms of their dispositions to govern particular bodies, then it is not clear how he can reconcile this with his claim that souls are identical in essence.

At the end of this selection, Ibn Sīnā proposes an analogy that illustrates the relation of the human soul to the Active Intellect. In doing so, he makes crucial use of an extended comparison between the influence of the Active Intellect on the soul and the influence of the light of the sun on the terrestrial realm. The use of light as a metaphor for the divine emanation (transmitted via the celestial intelligences) is prevalent in Ibn Sīnā's writing on this subject and is also used by other Islamic philosophers to illustrate the connection between the celestial and the terrestrial realm. Ibn Sīnā begins by explaining the difference between the vegetative, animal, and human souls in terms of the manner in which they have been influenced by the Active Intellect. He compares it to the difference in the way that three material bodies might be influenced by the light of the sun. Some bodies are such that they are merely heated by the sun, others are illuminated by it (better: reflect its light), and yet others are so

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susceptible to it that they might actually be ignited. Every body that is ignited is also illuminated and heated, and every body that is illuminated is also heated. This metaphor brings out the fact that the animal soul possesses the vegetative faculties, and that the human soul possesses both the animal and vegetative faculties. The metaphor has further respects of similarity, since once a fire has been ignited in a material body, that body goes on to heat and illuminate on its own, just as a human soul activated by the Active Intellect can go on to reason on its own, thereby acquiring some of the attributes of the Active Intellect itself. Finally, just as the sun is both a source of illumination as well as a perceptible, so also the Active Intellect actualizes thinking in the soul and can itself become an object of thought. Once the human soul achieves its highest state of thinking, it manages to conceive of the Active Intellect and to reflect its content.

Al-Ghazālī, The Rescuer from Error

Often considered an intellectual autobiography, this text is at best a rational reconstruction of the intellectual life of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 AD), specifically his lifelong quest for knowledge or certainty. Indeed, it is often a considerable challenge to determine how his biographical details map on to his intellectual development. To tackle this question, one needs to plot the bare details of Ghazālī's life. He was born in Tus (near Meshhed in what is now northeastern Iran) and grew up there, leaving it in 1077 at the age of 19. For the next fourteen years he was at Nishapur, teaching at the Nizāmīyyah college until 1085, then serving as court adviser to the famed Seljuk vizier Nizām al-Mulk until 1091. In 1091, at the age of 33, he moved to Baghdād to take up a teaching post at the Nizāmīyyah college there. Four years later, he experienced an intellectual crisis that caused him to stop teaching, which lasted six months and led to his traveling to Damascus, Jerusalem, Hebron, Mecca, and Medina. These travels lasted a little over a year, ending some time in 1097, at which point he returned to Baghdād. He spent the next nine years or so in Baghdād in a state of solitude of some kind, during which he refrained from teaching and concentrated on his mystical experiences. By the end of this period, in 1106, Ghazālī was 48 and was summoned back to Nishapur. He returned to teaching in Nishapur, after an eleven-year hiatus, spending the rest of his days there and dying at the age of 53 in 1111.

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As for his intellectual quest, it proceeds as follows. He tells us that as a youth he had some dissatisfaction with conformist beliefs (*taqlīdīyyāt*), or beliefs acquired on the basis of tradition and authority. This led him to question many of his beliefs from an early age and to adopt a broadly skeptical outlook. Much later, at the age of 37, he experienced sharp pangs of doubt that caused him to be unsure of all his beliefs, even those based on the senses and on reason, leaving him without any beliefs at all. This intellectual crisis lasted two months and ended only when God enlightened him, casting a light into his breast. Ghazālī is quite explicit that this light from God restored his trust in the necessary truths, that is, those beliefs based on reason alone. We can presume that it also restored his sensory beliefs, since he would surely have needed them to get further in his intellectual quest, which consists in a systematic investigation of what he takes to be the four classes of truth-seekers: theologians, philosophers, Instructionists (an Islamic sect who believe that authoritative teaching is dispensed by an infallible religious leader), and mystics (*Ṣūfīs*). What is certain from the text is that this bout of skepticism coincides with the intellectual crisis described above. However, what is not certain is when he went on to investigate the first three classes of truth-seekers. In the text, he implies that he did so directly after this crisis and before he proceeded to investigate mysticism (the fourth class of truth-seekers), but this is unlikely, since he tells us that philosophy alone took two years of his time. It is more likely, given the fact that he had been the equivalent of a seminary professor, teaching mainly theology and jurisprudence for around eighteen years prior to his skeptical crisis, that he had already undertaken an investigation of these three classes before his bout with skepticism. Thus, after his necessary beliefs (and perhaps sensory beliefs) had been restored, he proceeded to investigate the theory and practice of mysticism, which we can presume occupied him for the next eleven years or so. But before embarking on his investigation of mysticism, he informs us that some of his basic religious beliefs were also restored to him (belief in God, prophecy, and the Day of Judgment). Since these are neither sensory nor necessary beliefs, they must not have been acquired as a result of the light cast by God. Ghazālī is somewhat evasive as to how these beliefs were acquired, telling us simply that they became entrenched in his soul “not as a result of a specific and explicit proof, but rather due to reasons, indications, and experiences, the details of which do not lend themselves to a brief summary” [133–4]. This suggests that these sciences were pursued

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after his rescue from skepticism and before he embarked on the in-depth study of mysticism. However, we have already seen that the investigation of philosophy alone took two years. Thus, the chronological sequence cannot have been as he implies. One alternative is that the belief in these things had eventuated from a reflection on his earlier studies of theology and philosophy, which took place in the interval between his being rescued from skepticism and his delving into mysticism (an interval that must have been fairly short based on what he tells us about his autobiography). What this shows is that Ghazālī's account of the four main stages of his intellectual development (skeptical crisis, fideist resolution, investigation of the three classes of truth-seekers, and immersion in mysticism) must be a rational reconstruction to some extent. The four stages cannot have been as compartmentalized as he makes out; in particular, the third stage must not have been neatly confined to a single phase in his life.

The parallels with Descartes' intellectual crisis and bout of skepticism, as recounted in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, have often been noted. However, the similarity between the two accounts stops more or less at the point at which the two philosophers find themselves in a state of radical doubt. After that, Ghazālī's solution may be regarded as fideist, while Descartes' is plainly rationalist. Unlike Descartes, Ghazālī makes no attempt to prove the existence of God, stating simply that, "Whoever supposes that enlightenment depends upon explicit proofs has narrowed the expanse of God's mercy" [86–7]. Indeed, he advances a reason as to why there *can be* no rational escape route from a situation of extreme skepticism, pointing out that a proof can only be given by employing certain first principles, but if these are not accepted by the skeptic, then no proof is forthcoming. That is why the fideist solution is the only one open to him, and why he relies on a light from God to restore some of his basic beliefs.

It is evident from this text that Ghazālī did not consider himself a philosopher, but he nevertheless mastered the techniques, vocabulary, and doctrines of the philosophers so thoroughly that he made original philosophical contributions of his own, particularly in his celebrated attack on philosophy, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*). His conflicted relationship with philosophy thus makes him a philosopher despite himself. In this less systematic text, his critique of philosophy is very abbreviated and appears in the context of a foray into both philosophy and theology to determine whether either of them is able to

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supply him with certainty. Armed with the bare foundations of knowledge, Ghazālī investigates the theologians and the philosophers. Interestingly, he regards the theologians as useless for this purpose on the grounds that they take too much for granted and can therefore be “of little use for someone who only accepts necessary [truths]” [92]. The reason is that their enterprise is primarily a defensive one: they defend religion against the unorthodox by beginning from the beliefs they share with them and proceeding to show them the errors of their ways. Since they do not start from first principles, they fail to serve Ghazālī’s purpose. This shows that even though Ghazālī is professionally committed to theology and counts himself among the theologians, he nevertheless shares the philosophers’ conception of theology as a dialectical discipline that bases its conclusions on commonly accepted opinions rather than on first principles.

As for the philosophers, Ghazālī dismisses them too, though he does so less summarily than the theologians. In this text, he conveys only a few of his many grievances with the philosophers, whom he splits up into three main groups: materialists, naturalists, and theists. Since the first are atheists and the second deny the afterlife, he gives greatest consideration to the third group, including Plato, Aristotle, Fārābī, and Ibn Sīnā. He finds their main errors to be in metaphysics, over such matters as the denial of bodily resurrection in the afterlife. However, he states that he has exposed their errors elsewhere (primarily in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*), and proceeds to expose the dangers that arise from such philosophical sciences as mathematics and ethics. In doing so, he defends esotericism, an attitude he shares with most of the Islamic philosophers he opposes. He argues that it is necessary to restrict access to the books of the philosophers and to bar their teachings to the multitude in order to avoid two dangers: blind acceptance by impressionable neophytes and blanket dismissal by intolerant religious fanatics.

Having been disappointed by the theologians and philosophers,⁶ Ghazālī goes on to find what he is looking for in mysticism, which he tells us cannot be learned merely from books but must actually be practiced. It turns out not to be a simple matter to articulate precisely what Ghazālī learned from mysticism, though by the end of his mystical experience he appears to have restored all his former beliefs. However, what is certain is

⁶ Ghazālī also dismisses a third group of knowledge-seekers, the Instructionists (*al-Ta’līmīyyūn*), an Islamic sect associated with the Ismā’īlīs who claim that truth is to be found in the teachings of an infallible religious leader. That portion of the text has not been included in this translation.

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that Ghazālī thinks that mystical insight is of a different order from rational thought. There is a fairly consistent distinction throughout this text between knowledge (*ilm*) and cognizance (*maʿrifah*, sometimes also linked to *idrāk*, or apprehension), according to which the former is propositional in character, based on reason, and capable of demonstration, while the latter is nonpropositional, based on mystical insight, and capable only of direct acquaintance (literally, “tasting,” *dhamq*). Though Ghazālī sometimes uses these terms loosely, they generally mark a distinction between a strictly rational body of thought that is obtained using the demonstrative method that the philosophers advocate, and a type of insight that transcends reason or the intellect and must be obtained through other means, such as mystical experience. This distinction between knowledge and cognizance is underwritten by Ghazālī’s proof of prophecy, by which he means, in part, a realm beyond reason or intellect (*ʿaql*) and a source of cognizance that outstrips rational knowledge. Unlike Fārābī, who regards prophecy as a talent for conveying rational truths in symbolic form, and Ibn Sīnā, who regards it as a faculty for reaching rational conclusions speedily and promptly, Ghazālī views it as a capacity to glean insights that lie beyond reason – though that is only one aspect of prophecy, he hastens to add.

One of Ghazālī’s main tasks in this text is to show that prophecy, in the sense of a mode of apprehension that surpasses reason, is a genuine phenomenon, and he claims to do so in three distinct ways. First, he offers what he takes to be a rational *demonstration* that nonrational apprehension is possible. He argues that truths of a nonrational nature have been acquired by humanity (in medicine and astrology, among other domains), and goes on to say that they must have come by them thanks to a nonrational source of insight. Secondly, Ghazālī states that prophecy can be affirmed by means of a direct *awareness* of the mystical state, which is “the beginning of prophecy,” though it is by no means the whole story. This is what he calls “tasting” (*dhamq*) and it involves a mystical experience, which is, however, not accessible to all people. Indeed, he holds that the things that were revealed to him while he was in the mystical state (*ḥāl*) cannot even be expressed in language, and that any such attempt is liable to distort or falsify. Finally, prophecy is established through trust in testimony and second-hand corroboration, which is what he calls *faith* (*īmān*). This is not faith in the ordinary understanding of the term, since it is a phenomenon not restricted to religious matters, and crops up in

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many other instances (e.g. his example of the man who is sure that his father is not malevolent to him). His account of faith relies partly on the concept of “recurrent corroboration” (*tawātur*), which indicates a process whereby testimony is supported by numerous different sources, especially in authenticating a saying or report attributed to the prophet Muḥammad (*Hadīth*).

One way of understanding Ghazālī’s intellectual journey is that it effectively serves to rehabilitate his conformist beliefs (*taqlīd* has been translated here as conformism, but it also connotes: imitation, tradition, convention, and authority). These include such things as the belief that one must pray five times a day at fixed times and that certain religious rituals must be performed during the pilgrimage, among many others. Having questioned these beliefs at an early age, then having set them aside during his skeptical crisis and fideist resolution, he proceeds on his intellectual journey without them. They are rehabilitated not by a simple reversion to the beliefs he had before, since he informs us early on that once “the glass of conformity is fractured . . . the damage is irreparable” [90]. Rather, he arrives at them by a different route and they receive justification on altogether different grounds. The conformist beliefs, which he once accepted merely because they were handed down to him, are later embraced apparently on the basis of his belief in prophecy. Since he vindicates prophecy itself in three different ways (as mentioned above), this renders his erstwhile conformist beliefs no longer conformist. They have become every bit as secure as the sensory or rational beliefs. Moreover, this epistemological transformation is accompanied by an attitudinal change, for Ghazālī insists at the end of his journey that, while he once disseminated the knowledge that brings fame, he now spreads “the knowledge that brings about the rejection of fame, and by means of which one becomes cognizant of its insignificance” [160].

Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy bin Yaqzān*

Ibn Ṭufayl (c. 1109–86 AD) was born around the same time as Ghazālī died, at the opposite end of the Islamic world, near the town of Granada in Spain. Little is known about his early life, though it is clear that he studied medicine and philosophy, and practiced as a physician in Granada, eventually becoming secretary to the governor of the province. He occupied progressively senior positions, eventually serving as court physician to the

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Almohad sultan of Spain and parts of North Africa, Abū Ya^cqūb Yūsuf, upon whom he exercised considerable influence. The text excerpted here is the only one of his philosophical works to survive, but he also wrote treatises on medicine and astronomy, and is said to have held certain anti-Ptolemaic views in astronomy. After Abū Ya^cqūb died in 1184, Ibn Ṭufayl went on to perform the same role for his son and successor Abū Yūsuf Ya^cqūb, who was, however, less interested in philosophy than his father, and he died in his service in Marrakesh in 1186.

This work, entitled *Ḥayy bin Yaqzān* (literally, Alive Son of Awake) after its eponymous hero, recounts the tale of an autodidact who lives by himself on a desert island. The selection translated in this volume constitutes over three-quarters of the work, omitting an extensive introductory section and a concluding epilogue. In this middle section of the text, the emphasis is on showing that a single human being in isolation from others, equipped simply with a superior intellect and a disposition for virtue, can discover for himself the main truths of philosophy (including natural science). Ibn Ṭufayl is also concerned to show that such an individual can surpass the rational realm, crossing over to a mystical state that furnishes him with a vision of the supernatural. In addition, the work functions as a kind of philosophical primer that can serve to introduce neophytes to basic philosophical concepts through the story of their spontaneous discovery by a single individual.

As if to convey the point that there can be both a purely naturalistic or scientific explanation as well as a nonscientific explanation for the same phenomenon, we are provided with two accounts of how Ḥayy came to be on his uninhabited island. The first involves spontaneous generation from clay, while the second consists of a fanciful story of forbidden love, illicit marriage, and the dispatch of a newborn infant in a wooden chest over the waves, a tale that might almost have been drawn from the *Thousand and One Nights*. But the two accounts quickly converge and Ibn Ṭufayl proceeds to recount the stages of Ḥayy's development, which are conveniently divided into seven seven-year periods (taking him up to the age of 50). After being reared in his early years by a doe, Ḥayy embarks on his intellectual journey by undertaking an empirical investigation of the world around him. This leads him to uncover important metaphysical truths, and his journey ends with a discovery of mysticism and the euphoric visions that one obtains from it.

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The first four phases of Ḥayy's life are largely taken up with an investigation into the terrestrial realm, though this eventually includes knowledge of matters that originate in the celestial sphere, such as the forms of objects and the rational soul. He gains knowledge not just of the natural sciences, for example by undertaking anatomical dissections of various different species of animals, but also of metaphysics, for example by contemplating the difference between body and soul. In recounting Ḥayy's intellectual progress, Ibn Ṭufayl introduces his readers in an intuitive way to some of the main philosophical and scientific doctrines that he shared with his fellow Islamic philosophers, including the distinction between form and matter, the nature of the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire), the difference between essence and accident, and the role of the Active Intellect. For example, Ḥayy establishes the existence of the Active Intellect after investigating the process whereby the four elements are transformed into one another. As water is heated, it is transformed into steam, a process that he understands in terms of eliminating one form and replacing it with another. He reasons that this necessitates an agent that bestows forms on natural objects, which is none other than the Active Intellect. After completing this inquiry into the natural world, the fifth phase of Ḥayy's life takes him from the terrestrial to the celestial realm, engaging him in discussions of the nature of the universe, which lead him to conclude that it is finite and has been created by an immaterial creator. Thus, this phase of Ḥayy's life (at the end of which he reaches the age of 35) concludes with a proof of the existence of God.

The sixth phase of his life moves Ḥayy from the realm of theory into the realm of practice. Given the absence of other human beings on his island, these practical endeavors involve his conduct towards other living creatures, his conduct towards himself, and his conduct towards God, in the form of spiritual exercises that aim ultimately at constant contemplation of God. Indeed, this phase also brings forth a tension between mystical contemplation and practical attention to the needs of other creatures (which is later heightened in the epilogue to the text). On the grounds that he shares something with animals, celestial beings, and God Himself, Ḥayy sets himself three different tasks or "emulations." The first emulation pertains to the animals and aims to secure Ḥayy's livelihood and ensure his continued survival in such a way that he is not distracted from the vision of God. It therefore involves an ascetic existence that causes the

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least amount of disruption to the work of the Creator. The second emulation involves imitating three attributes of the celestial bodies (including the sun): caring for his fellow creatures in the realm of generation and corruption, practicing purity and circular motion, and enjoying a vision of God. Finally, the third emulation is continuous with the third part of the second emulation since it also involves reflecting on God. Emulation of God's positive attributes involves knowing Him without associating Him in any way with materiality. Meanwhile, emulation of His negative attributes (mainly, freedom from matter) entails ridding himself of material attachments and preoccupations. At this point, Ibn Ṭufayl informs us that a tension arises between the second and third emulations, since part of the objective of the second is the care of other creatures, whereas the third calls for utter withdrawal from the world. Ḥayy never resolves the tension; instead, he becomes increasingly detached from the material world and seeks ever greater proximity to God. Eventually, he succeeds in achieving an uninterrupted mystical vision for longer periods of time, with minimal pauses to replenish himself and keep body and soul together. Thus, the seventh phase of his life ends with Ḥayy achieving this mystical vision and being imbued with some form of mystical insight.

When it comes to the status of mystical insight and the possibility of a nonrational mode of apprehension, Ibn Ṭufayl's position seems to be situated somewhere between Ibn Sīnā's and Ghazālī's. He does not go so far as the latter in holding that mysticism provides a source of insight that cannot be apprehended through reason. However, he would not appear to concur with Ibn Sīnā's conception of the prophetic faculty simply as an enhanced ability to frame deductive arguments. This emerges most clearly in the prologue to this text (which has not been included in this translation), where he likens the acquisition of mystical insight to the acquisition of the sense of sight by a congenitally blind man. He explains that this does not confer any new information on the man who acquires the new sensory modality, since he knew the shapes and appearances of things by touch as well as by hearsay. It merely presents the same information more vividly.⁷ Ibn Ṭufayl agrees with Ghazālī that reason breaks down

⁷ This analogy might be interpreted differently, namely, as implying that one does indeed learn something new from mysticism, since some information is available to sight that is not available to touch and the other sensory modalities. This depends on one's view about the ability to transfer information gained from one sensory modality to another. The question has an illustrious history in modern philosophy, beginning perhaps with Locke's discussion of Molyneux's problem. It has